

Pittaway, Mark, *The Workers' State: Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944-1958* (2012), x + 386 (The University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, \$55.00, hardcover).

Reconstructing Legitimacy: The Socialist State, the Working Class and the Road to the Workers' Revolution against the Workers' State

Mark Pittaway was a renowned labor historian, who died at a tragically young age of thirty-nine after submitting the manuscript of his book on the complex and ever changing relationship between the Hungarian working class and the emerging socialist state to the University of Pittsburgh Press. His former PhD-advisor, Nigel Swain undertook the task of preparing the manuscript for print and assuming responsibility for Mark Pittaway's scholarly legacy.

The Workers' State has already received the recognition of the academic public because it was awarded the 2012 book prize of the Hungarian Studies Association (HSA). The book, which interrogates the crucial question of how the socialist state attempted to create the new Communist working class and how it failed in this attempt through three different case-studies representing three different working-class milieus -the worker-peasant milieu of Zala, the militant mining community of Tatabánya and the "mixed" industrial suburb of Újpest with a strong social democratic tradition - is pathbreaking in the literature from three different aspects.

Firstly, by giving a well-researched account of the everyday life of the three different industrial communities, it convincingly argues that the state's attempts at breaking with old shop floor cultures and established hierarchies and working-class identities met strong resistance, which could only be dealt with severe repression.¹ The use of wide-scale violence was, however, utterly counterproductive because it further alienated the working-class from the workers' state, leading to the outright collapse of the legitimacy of the regime. Consolidation and the re-establishment of the state's authority after the 1956 revolution essentially meant the informal recognition of informal bargaining at the shopfloor, the practical abandonment of the project of the transformation of labor and the re-establishment of old hierarchies, which favored the skilled, male elite mainly in the heavy industries and mining. This thesis links the research to the burgeoning literature on totalitarian states, which attacks the concept of totalitarianism as an ideological construct, a product of cold war discourse.²

Pittaway's book starts from the core assumption that legitimacy can be constructed in different ways, and indeed, he convincingly shows that at the beginning (in the brief period of the people's democracy, which offered a markedly different path to socialism than the Stalinist model, which was exported to Eastern Europe after 1948) the socialist state could

¹ Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain* shows how the Bolsheviks attempted to create a new civilization by transforming the language and culture of the working class. (Kotkin, Stephen: *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995). Pittaway points out the essential constraints and ultimate failure of this project.

² The revisionist school of Soviet Studies attacked the totalitarian thesis well before the end of the cold war. See: Eszter Bartha: A sztálinizmus a régi és új historiográfiában: A jelenség meghatározásának elméleti és módszertani problémái (Stalinism in the old and new historiographies: The theoretical and methodological problems of defining the phenomenon). In: Krausz Tamás ed: *Tanulmányok és dokumentumok a sztálinizmus történetéből*. Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 2003, 15-40).

establish legitimacy among certain segments of the working class and the peasantry, which aspired to more equality and opportunities for upward social mobility than they were accustomed to under the Horthy-era. Apart from the Soviet pressure, this grassroots left-wing radicalism acted as a catalyst for the formation of a socialist dictatorship. Pittaway takes ideology seriously rather than merely a cover for the introduction of central planning and scientific-instrumental methods for managing the workforce, which provided for the continued commodification of labor. This is in line with new research on the Soviet working class, which enjoys a larger literature than Hungarian workers, despite the tradition of the 1956 revolution.³

Thirdly, *The Workers' State* sheds new light on the social origins of 1956 by exploring the reasons for the mounting discontent of workers and the deeply seated disappointment with “their” regime. Pittaway masterfully links the case studies to a macro-analysis, which is rare in the current Hungarian literature where in social history micro-studies prevail. Many of his results support the revisionists’ conclusions, the argument, for example that Stakhanovites frequently acted as mediators between the State and the working-class,⁴ and that informal bargaining was prevalent on the shopfloor.⁵ While 1956 belongs to one of the most well-researched topics in Hungary, Pittaway develops a dimension, which has hitherto been neglected in both the international and the Hungarian literature.

Pittaway carefully distinguishes between urban industrial workers and *kétlaki* (worker-peasants), who retain their rural residence and small plots of land. My only criticism is that while he explores the differences between the working-class formation of Hungary, which was a poor agrarian-industrial state at the end of the Second World War and that of the advanced capitalist countries (albeit the latter also display important differences), there is still space for taking into account the peripheral state of the country, which impacted on the social stratification and working-class cultures (e.g. frequent absenteeism from work at harvest times). The rise of the standard-of-living was a constantly strong motivation and a very positive catchword. This enabled the rapid consolidation of the Kádár regime. The formation of the Hungarian working class is, however, inseparable from the semi-peripheral capitalist development of the country.⁶

Mark Pittaway’s book is a landmark in the writing of 20th century Hungarian history. As the Hungarian volume dedicated to his memory shows, his thoughts have found a fertile soil, in particular among young scholars and PhD students.⁷ It is to be hoped that his lead continues.

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³ As Kotkin formulated: „After many years of archival research we established that those Communists – were indeed Communists!” (*Comparative Studies of Communism: New Perspectives*. Conference at Central European University, Budapest, 27 May, 2010).

⁴ See: Siegelbaum, Lewis: ‘Dear Comrade, You Ask What We Need’: Socialist Paternalism and Social Rural Notables in the mid-1930s. *Slavic Review*, 1998/2.

⁵ Burawoy, Michael: *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism*. Verso, London, 1985.

⁶ For a review of the global working-class histories see: Linden, Marcel van der: *Határok nélküli munkástörténet*. In: Bartha Eszter – Varga Zsuzsanna (eds): *Határokon túl: Tanulmánykötet Mark Pittaway (1971-2010) emlékére*. L’Harmattan, Budapest, 2012, 63-92.

⁷ Bartha Eszter – Varga Zsuzsanna eds. (2012).

